

LITERARY THEORY
AN HISTORICAL
INTRODUCTION

MARTIN PROCHÁZKA

Literary theory
An historical introduction

Prof. PhDr. Martin Procházka, CSc.

Recenzovali:

Prof. PhDr. Martin Hilský, CSc.

PhDr. Kamila Vránková, Ph.D.

Vydala Univerzita Karlova v Praze
Nakladatelství Karolinum
jako učební text pro posluchače Filozofické fakulty UK
Sazba DTP Nakladatelství Karolinum
Čtvrté vydání, v Nakladatelství Karolinum druhé

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ISBN 978-80-246-3006-9

ISBN 978-80-246-3014-4 (online : pdf)



Univerzita Karlova v Praze
Nakladatelství Karolinum 2015

www.karolinum.cz

ebooks@karolinum.cz

Contents

PART ONE: HISTORICAL OUTLINE OF LITERARY THEORIES

Introduction	7
Approaches to Aesthetics and Literary Theory	7
M.H.Abrams's Typology of Literary Theories	9
Antiquity: Plato, Aristotle, Horace, Longinus	11
Plato and Platonism	11
Aristotle's <i>Poetics</i>	19
Ancient Rome: Horace and Longinus	23
Renaissance	27
Sir Philip Sidney:	
<i>The Defense of Poesie</i> or <i>An Apologie for Poetrie</i>	31
Classicism, Augustan Age, Neoclassicism	37
John Dryden (1631–1700)	40
Alexander Pope (1688–1744)	42
Dr. Samuel Johnson (1709–1784)	42
Romanticism	44
The Victorians	52
Thomas Carlyle (1795–1881)	53
Matthew Arnold (1822–1888)	55
John Ruskin (1819–1900)	56
William Morris (1834–1896)	59
Walter Pater (1839–1894)	60
New Criticism	64
Structuralism and Semiotics	72
Roman Jakobson (1896–1982)	75
René Wellek and Austin Warren: <i>Theory of Literature</i>	76
Northrop Frye and Archetypal Criticism	78
Roland Barthes: <i>Mythologies</i>	82
Deconstruction: an Introduction	87
Deconstruction in America	97
New Historicism	107
Feminist and Psychoanalytic Criticism	116

Feminist Criticism	117
Psychoanalytic Criticism	122

PART TWO: CONCEPTS AND METHODS

Metaphor	129
Metonymy	133
Synecdoche	135
Allegory	136
Symbol	140
Metre	142
Rhyme	148
Free Verse	152
Drama	154
Narrative Poetry	162
Narrative Structures	169
Bibliography	173

**PART ONE: HISTORICAL OUTLINE
OF LITERARY THEORIES**

Introduction

APPROACHES TO AESTHETICS AND LITERARY THEORY

In the first half of the twentieth century aesthetics was often believed to be in a state of confusion. Many British and American scholars thought it a “pseudo-philosophy”

neither logical nor scientific, nor quite whole-heartedly and empirically matter of fact...without application in practice to test it and without an orthodox terminology to make it into an honest superstition or the thoroughgoing and satisfying cult. It is neither useful to creative artists nor a help to amateurs in appreciation.

(D.W. Prall, *Philosophies of Beauty* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1931], p.ix)

Now we can see the reason for this confusion. In the traditional classification of sciences each science is distinguished by its own subject-matter and field and by the use of specific methodologies. But this classification may be useful only in the most abstract philosophical terms. In sciences as well as in the humanities the situation of individual disciplines is much less clear since their subject-matters, fields and methods often overlap (stylistics, for example, is based on linguistics and literary theory). Therefore many disciplines in the humanities are of **relational nature**: they are not defined by their own field, subject matter and individual methods but rather by their relations to other disciplines.

This also holds for aesthetics and its subdivision, literary theory. It is generally accepted that aesthetics deals with the origins and nature of our feelings toward beauty, and its manifestations in the works of art. Aesthetics also describes and explains the creative process and studies historical forms of the beautiful. But this is not yet a definition of aesthetics. Rather, it is an enumeration of its major themes.

Aesthetics and literary theory can be defined in many different ways on the basis of their relations to other disciplines. Thus, we have a **philosophical definition of aesthetics**, stating for instance, as Immanuel Kant did, that its chief feature is a special kind of judgement: aesthetic judgement which differs substantially from all other philosophical judgements. It is not concerned with our understanding of reality but with the free play of our cognitive and imaginative powers.

Another, and probably the oldest, definition of aesthetics sees its specificity in the determination of standards or norms of beauty. This **normative** approach was current in the earlier phases of the discipline's development (from the antiquity to Classicism). It builds on the authority of tradition: the notion of the beautiful is derived from ancient models of beauty (old Greek and Roman works). Aesthetic qualities of the work of art are prescribed (by a set of rules) rather than described. In this way, aesthetics and theory of literature are subordinated to the traditional disciplines of poetics (dealing with the means art uses to imitate reality) and of rhetoric (dealing with the figures of speech and the way they can influence the emotional reactions of the audience).

Another approach to aesthetics and literary theory is concerned with the values present in the work of art and, more specifically, with its use, usefulness or function. This **value-oriented or axiological** approach is traditionally concerned with the salutary effects of art on the public: the improvement of morals, emotional education and the cultivation of human senses. Other, more recent and sophisticated forms of this approach point out that art can help us rediscover the values of everyday life and return the sense and substance to the alienated objects and events. Clearly, this approach does not limit itself to the study of the beautiful: it is preoccupied with the mediatory role of art in modern society.

The last group of aesthetic theories is characterized by a different point of departure. Instead of the search for specific features of the beautiful a more modern approach is employed: the theory of signs or **semiotics**. General semiotics founded by the American philosopher Charles Morris classifies all phenomena under two main types of signs: indexes (e.g. the smoke which is a sign of the fire but at the same time it does not depict, or represent it) and icons (the object is represented by its image). The latter kind of signs is frequent in art. In literary theory, however a special concept of the language sign typical of de Saussure's linguistic theory is being used. De Saussure defines the sign not as an object or a representation, but as a relation

establishing meaning. There are two components or poles of this relation: the *signifier* (a figure designating a certain meaning) and the *signified* (the meaning designated by the figure). The problem is that the meaning may or may not refer to an object, and the meanings of signs are often derived only from other signs.

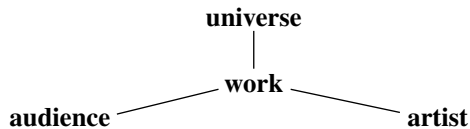
M.H. ABRAMS'S TYPOLOGY OF LITERARY THEORIES

A different and perhaps less complicated approach to the classification of aesthetic theories has been delineated by the American scholar M.H. Abrams in the introduction to his book on Romantic aesthetics, entitled *The Mirror and the Lamp* (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1953). In opposition to the relational definitions of aesthetics, Abrams tries to find “a frame of reference [for literary theories] simple enough to be readily manageable.” (p. 5) He also wants to avoid the silent translation of “the basic terms of all theories into [anyone’s] favourite philosophical vocabulary” (*Ibid.*). His solution is an “analytic scheme which avoids imposing its own philosophy, by utilizing those key distinctions which are already common to the largest possible number of theories to be compared”. (p. 6)

Abrams’ scheme determines four basic elements, or dimensions, of any “situation” of the work of art:

work	product of the creative process
artist	creator of the work
universe	everything which has become the subject of the work, and the relationship of the work to “reality”
audience	those to whom the work is addressed

These elements can be grouped into a simple triangular diagram with the *work* in the centre.



This means that the work of art can be explained from its relation to different forms of **the other**. The approaches which suppose that the other is **the artist** are called **expressive** because they usually explain art as the artist’s self-expression. If the other is **the universe**, the theory is named **mimetic** because

it defines art as the imitation of reality. If the other is **the audience**, the theory is called **pragmatic** because it is concentrated on the art as an action which produces specific effects, chiefly moral changes of the audience. Finally, the theories explaining the work art **just from itself**, as an **autonomous object** are called **objective**.

We should keep in mind, M.H. Abrams writes, that the principal elements discussed in individual theories are not constants but **variables**. Take for instance the universe: according to one mimetic theory the artist imitates the beautiful aspects of nature, another theory says that he represents the moral aspects of human nature, and still others claim that art depicts the world of ideas or that it should imitate the natural world of common sense. **Thus, the understanding of the four basic elements of the situation of the work of art varies from one theoretical approach to another.**

The following chapters in Part One demonstrate several historical forms of these relationships and other important theories and concepts in English and American aesthetic and literary theory. A discussion of the most important developments in the antiquity is prefixed, since many theories of later ages refer to them.

QUESTIONS

1. Why was aesthetics and literary theory called a pseudo-science?
2. Explain a relational nature of aesthetics and literary theory. Give examples of relational approaches.
3. Why did M.H. Abrams design his typology of literary theories?
4. Explain the terms M.H. Abrams uses for the four basic types of aesthetic theories.
5. Give examples of the variability of the four elements of the work of art. Use your knowledge of literary history.

Antiquity: Plato, Aristotle, Horace, Longinus

Western theory of literature started to develop in ancient Greece and Rome. As we shall see, the idea of literature in these cultures was widely different from our contemporary views.¹ Greek or Roman notions of literature indicated rather a *verbal art* than written texts and made less of a distinction between art and philosophy. For these reasons, ancient approaches to literature are inseparable from philosophical reflections or opinions on oratory.

If we recall M.H. Abrams's typology of literary approaches, we shall find the germs of all four types in the theories of the ancients. The problem is that no author discussed in this chapter represents a pure type of literary theory. Thus, Plato's philosophy has both mimetic and expressive features and Aristotle's *Poetics*, which is mainly a work of mimetic theory, shows also conspicuous marks of objective theories. Horace's *Ars poetica* is basically pragmatic but deals also with expressive and mimetic aspects of the work of art. And in Longinus's treatise *On the Sublime* (*Peri hypsous* [*hipsus:s*]) there are expressive, mimetic and pragmatic traits. Viewed from a *relational* perspective, some of the approaches are mostly philosophical (like Aristotle's), others (like Plato's) are axiological, and still others (like Horace's) are normative.

PLATO AND PLATONISM

Our trip through the realm of ancient literary theory will start with a glance at the aesthetic thoughts of Plato (427–347 B.C.). They appear in Plato's

¹ But even now it is very difficult to define a distinctive quality of literature: we could agree on "the art whose material is language," but drama is also a part of literature and it includes non-verbal elements such as theatre-space, bodily action, stage objects etc. There are also attempts to define literature on the basis of some general quality of literary language – *figurative language*, using poetic and rhetoric figures – or, in broader terms of literary *discourse* (an utterance in its specific extralingual context), as the mode of writing characterized by *literariness*. This literariness cannot be defined in positive terms but only negatively: for instance by the absence of spoken language or by the *liminal* position of literary texts (they are neither life nor the ideal, neither body nor the abstract thought).

dialogues, and Plato attributes them to his great teacher Socrates. In the dialogues *Ion* and *Phaedrus* Plato discusses literary and philosophical *inspiration*. Literature, philosophy and also oratory are inspired by a “divine power”. In *Ion* this power is only vaguely defined: it is described metaphorically as magnetic power attracting divinely gifted people to the transcendental beauty and ideas and the less gifted to the beauty and ideas created or invented by these divinely gifted people. The exemplary situation Plato depicts is that of the famous Ephesian rhapsodist Ion who is an enthusiastic interpreter of Homer. Inasmuch as Homer is attracted by the divine beauty, Ion is influenced by the beauty in Homer’s poetry. The audience becomes the last link in this chain, they listen to Homer because they are moved by the rhapsodist’s art.

I do observe it, Ion, and I am going to point out to you what I take it to mean. For, as I was saying just now, this is not an art in you, whereby you speak well on Homer, but a divine power which moves you like that in the stone which Euripides named a magnet,... For this stone not only attracts iron rings, but also imparts to them a power whereby they in turn are able to do the very same thing as the stone, and attract other rings; so that sometimes there is formed quite a long chain of bits of iron and rings, suspended one from another; and they all depend for this power on that one stone. In the same manner the Muse inspires men herself, and then by means of these inspired persons the inspiration spreads to others, and holds them in a connected chain. For all the good epic poets utter all those fine poems not from art, but as inspired and possessed, and the good lyric poets likewise...when they have started on the melody and the rhythm they begin to be frantic, and it is under possession – as the bacchantes are possessed, and not in their senses, when they draw honey and milk from the rivers – that the soul of the lyric poets does the same thing, by their own report. ... Seeing then that it is not by art that they compose and utter so many fine things about the deeds of men – as you do about Homer – but by a divine dispensation, each is able to compose that to which the Muse has stirred him, this man dithyrambs, another laudatory odes, another dance-songs, another epic or else iambic verse; but each is at fault in any other kind. For not by art do they utter these things, but by divine influence; since, if they had fully learned by art to speak on one kind of theme, they would know how to speak on all. And for this reason God takes away the mind of

these men and uses them as his ministers, just as he uses soothsayers and godly seers, in order that we who hear them may know that it is not they who utter these words of great price, when they are out of their wits, but that it is God himself who speaks and addresses us through them. ...the poets are merely the interpreters of the gods, according as each is possessed by one of the heavenly powers.

...

And are you aware that your spectator is the last of the rings which I spoke of as receiving from each other the power transmitted from the Heracleian lodestone? [i.e., from the magnet] You, the rhapsode and actor, are the middle ring; the poet himself is first; but it is the god who through the whole series draws the souls of men withersoever he pleases, making the power of one depend on the other. And, just as from the magnet, there is a mighty chain of choric performers and masters suspended by side connexions from the rings that hang down from the Muse. One poet is suspended from one Muse, another from another: the word we use for it is "possessed", but it is much the same thing, for he is *held*. ... And so you, Ion, when the subject of Homer is mentioned, have plenty to say, but nothing on any of the others. And when you ask me the reason why you can speak at large on Homer but not on the rest, I tell you it is because your skill in praising Homer comes not by art, but by divine dispensation.

(Plato, *Ion*, 533 C–536 D)

Therefore the interpretation which is founded only on sacred enthusiasm does not develop any virtues and skills in the person of the interpreter. Nor does it increase the amount of knowledge and virtue among the common people. Hence, what Socrates pleads for is a deeper understanding of the work of art which has to be based on the understanding of life itself, of human work, and on authentic spiritual values. For this reason Socrates says ironically to Ion at the end of the dialogue

Choose therefore which of the two you prefer us to call you, dishonest or divine.

...

Then you may count on this nobler title in our minds, Ion, of being a divine and not an artistic praiser of Homer.

(Plato, *Ion*, 542 A–B)

Enthusiasm for and inspiration by divine beauty is also among the main themes of Plato's dialogue *Phaedrus*. But this time the art discussed is not recitation of old poems. It is oratory and rhetoric. With this theme a new question emerges: What is the purpose of writing? What is the use of recording speeches? In the strictest sense, these topics may not belong to the theory of art. Nevertheless they are important because they are articulated together with Plato's theory of inspiration, and with his thoughts about the analogy between divine art, love and philosophy, which are important for a number of later, Neo-Platonic and Renaissance Platonic theories.

In his discussion of inspiration Plato starts by distinguishing several types of obsessions and simultaneously several kinds of enthusiasm (*mania*). The first kind is the art of divination, of telling the future. The second is telling the future from earthly objects (from the flying of the birds for instance) and not from one's own prophetic vision. The third is the enthusiasm coming from the Muses, that kind of enthusiasm described in *Ion*. But the fourth is the most important: it is the spiritual vision of the soul when it can glance at the gods. This spiritual vision is common both to the lover and to the philosopher ("the lover of the wisdom") or supreme artist. The soul has first to transcend the terrestrial spheres – this act is symbolized by the growth of wings and the impatience of the steeds pulling the carriage driven by the soul. Having managed to ascend to the celestial region the soul can partake in the circular progress of the host of the gods and can see all things in a new light of eternal truth and justice. Then it returns to be reborn in another body. But how does it happen that the soul can transcend the earthly world? Looking at the terrestrial beauty one may start to recall the "real being" (divine Ideas) seen in one of his previous lives. For this reason the inspired person may be so attracted to the higher reality that others may consider him mad. Now here we have Theseus's dictum from Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: "The lunatic, the lover and the poet/ Are of imagination all compact." The background for this statement is the following passage of *Phaedrus*

All my discourse so far has been about the fourth kind of madness, which causes him [i.e., the inspired person] to be regarded as mad, who, when he sees the beauty on earth, remembering the true beauty, feels his wings growing and longs to stretch them for an upward flight, but cannot do so, and, like a bird, gazes upward and neglects the things below. My discourse has shown that this is, of all inspirations, the best

and of the highest origin to him who has it or who shares in it, and that he who loves the beautiful, partaking in this madness, is called a lover. For, as has been said, every soul of man has by the law of nature beheld the realities [i.e., the world of Ideas], otherwise it would not have entered into a human being, but it is not easy for all souls to gain from earthly things a recollection of those realities, either for those which had but a brief view of them at an earlier time, or for those which, after falling to earth, were so unfortunate as to be turned towards unrighteousness though some evil communications and to have forgotten the holy sights they once saw. Few then are left which retain an adequate recollection of them; but these when they see any likeness of the things of that other world, are stricken with amazement and can no longer control themselves; but they do not understand their condition, because they do not clearly perceive. Now in the earthly copies of justice and temperance [i.e., moderation] and the other ideas which are precious to souls there is no light, but only a few, approaching the images through the darkling organs of sense, behold in them the nature of that which they imitate, and these few do this with difficulty. But at that former time they saw beauty shining with brightness, when, with a blessed company – we following the train of Zeus, and others in that of some other god – they saw the blessed sight and vision and were initiated into that which is rightly called the most blessed of mysteries, which we celebrated in the state of perfection, when we were without experience of the evils which awaited us in the time to come, being permitted as initiates to the sight of the perfect and simple and calm and happy apparitions, which we saw in the pure light, being ourselves pure and not entombed in this which we carry about with us and call the body, in which we are imprisoned as an oyster in its shell.

(Plato, *Phaedrus*, 249 D–250 C)

Interesting here is the connection between madness, remembering the ideal visions, love and the art of rhetoric or eloquence. But later in the dialogue Plato makes some important distinctions between those modes with respect to the ways they are used in society. Whereas the true poetic inspiration is the process of recalling the visions of ideal world, writing down speeches, recording the art of an individual for public purpose, may in fact be just an attempt to get artlessness and inauthenticity publicly approved and endorsed as art. For that